LawHelp.org Resource Series: Guidelines for Creating Content Protocols

Content is the most important component to building an online statewide legal resource. It is what makes a site helpful to users and continues to bring them back. But coordinating content collection and uploading from various contributing organizations and individuals is a challenge.

As admins in your state begin loading content onto your LawHelp template, you may wish to establish protocols that address how content is to be reviewed, posted, and updated. This document highlights content management issues that have been addressed in various states' content protocols. These will hopefully help you in establishing your own state's content management plan.

What are "content protocols"?

A content protocol outlines how content is to be reviewed, posted, and updated. Basically, the "Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How" for your state.

Why are content protocols important?

- Having a content protocol will ensure consistency among the documents loaded to your site.
- Eliminates confusion about people's roles and responsibilities, thereby increasing efficiency.
- Manages expectations & avoids frustration.
- Allows more confidence in decentralized content administration.

Why write it down?

- Efficient way to educate people.
- Forces you to think through details.
- Ensures project longevity regardless of staff changes.

How do I get started?

Step One: Identify who reviews content

Review can take place at various stages and levels. You may wish to divide content review up. *Consider the following types of review (and when each takes place: Pre-launch vs. Post-launch):*

a. Substantive/Legal
Some states have piggybacked off of existing state task forces, or created groups which will review and approve all content in a given area.

Some states have further established procedures to ensure that every piece of content has been reviewed for legal accuracy before it is posted onto the site. In implementing this requirement, they have ensured that content contributors agree on the same standards for legal accuracy.

b. Adherence to style guidelines and Proper Geo and Topic Coding
Identify who reviews for adherence to content style guidelines and proper coding.

The best way to ensure that content contributed to the site adheres to the guidelines you have established is to educate content providers and distribute your guidelines widely. Nonetheless, this is no guarantee that every piece of content submitted for publication will conform to your style guidelines. Identify someone to review each piece of content. Will this be the responsibility of state administrators? Is it possible to establish a subcommittee of your stakeholder committee to conduct this review?

Additionally, state admins should review content for coding once it has been posted. Although a resource was posted under health care, does it also apply to seniors or public benefits? Was a statewide resource accidentally coded for only half the counties in the state?

c. Readability/Literacy
Identify your audience's literacy level and devise a system to ensure that content is written at this reading level.

Enlisting the assistance of someone trained to assess and edit for the desired grade level is ideal, however given limited resources this may not be feasible. There are some literature and tools available that can help you assess the reading level of your content and make appropriate changes. You may also wish to "field test" your content with clients and incorporate their feedback. See *Additional Resources* for further reading on this subject.

d. Translations
It is always best to use a qualified translator. Just because a person speaks another language does not mean that s/he is a skilled translator. Therefore, it's important not to overlook quality control for translated documents.

e. Usability/Accessibility (text only versions, color issues, seniors, etc)
You may wish to consider how users with certain vision difficulties will interact with your content. There are some simple rules you can follow with respect to color, font, size and layout that can make a big difference in someone's ability to easily read your content. See *Additional Resources* for further reading on this subject.

Step Two: Identify who posts content

The next step, once content has been gathered and reviewed, is posting. Identify your admins, and hold a training(s) so that they are comfortable using the template. Clear communication as to who will post which documents is key.

In instances where the content provider does not post the resource to the website, the following information should be provided:

–Contact info
–Title & description of resource
–Coding info (topic/geo)
–Most recent legal review/Date for next review

Where the content provider does not post a resource him/herself, make sure there is clear communication as to who will post the resource. The quickest way to lose the interest of a

participating organization is to ask them to take the time to provide content and then allow their content to fall through the cracks.

Step Three: Develop a plan for Content Maintenance

Keep in mind that gathering and posting content for your web site is a dynamic process, not a one-time exercise. The benefits of content development are short-lived without a system for keeping the content up to date. Therefore, it is important to develop a clear plan for how content will be reviewed for accuracy. Identify who is responsible for updating content, and who will oversee the updating process.

Consider assigning blocks of content to individual organizations, or setting up an "adopt a document" program where advocates take responsibility for updating individual documents. It is important that there be a person appointed to ensure that those who have said they will update content do so, or to reassign updates to new volunteers in cases where the original person responsible is unable to complete the update.

Step Four: Don't Neglect Records Keeping

Ensure there is a master list of all content collected for the site, with a record of status, next steps and/or review date. Ideally, the web site content coordinator will take on this role. There are content management spreadsheets available in the LawHelp library on probono.net that you may consider using to make this process easier, as well as reporting tools on the template that allow you to generate lists of content already posted to the site.

Additional Resources for Authoring Web-based Client Legal Education Materials

Clear & Simple: Developing Effective Print Materials for Low Literate Readers
Training manual developed by the National Institutes of Health & National Cancer Institute.
http://oc.nci.nih.gov/services/Clear_and_Simple/HOME.HTM

Effective Online Writing
From usableweb.com, a list of 19 links to articles & guidelines on effectively writing online.
http://usableweb.com/topics/001310-0-0.html

How Users Read on the Web
From UseIT.com, the website of Jakob Nielsen, Ph.D., a former Sun Microsystems Distinguished Engineer.

Collecting, Writing, and Revising Content
Helpful tips from usability.gov on writing & organizing easy-to-use content for the Web.
http://usability.gov/methods/collecting_writing.html

Web Writing for Many Interest Levels
May 1999 article by Nathan Wallace of E-gineer.com. http://www.e-gineer.com/articles/web-writing-for-many-interest-levels.phtml

Writing for the Web
By U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
http://www.hud.gov/library/bookshelf15/policies/wtfwm.cfm

Writing User Friendly Documents
A handbook developed by The Plain English Network (PEN), a government-wide group of volunteers working to improve communications from the federal government to the public.
http://www.blm.gov/nhp/NPR/pe_toc.html

Transcend translation services of Davis, CA, provided training related to client content at the 2002 Chicago TIG conference.   Helpful materials from their web site*:*

Low-Literacy Checklist: http://www.transcend.net/healthcare.htm
Readability Manual: http://www.transcend.net/low-lit/index.htm
"Is This a Good Translation?" Checklist: http://www.transcend.net/pdf/good_translation.pdf

Sample state content protocols:
http://www.probono.net/statewebsites/library.cfm?fa=detail&id=29200&appView=folder
(must be logged-in to access this link)